

GAMES

PREVIEW

The Sims 3



The Sims series is the biggest-selling PC gaming franchise of all time. The Sims 2 was released in 2004, yet the makers are still producing expansion packs.

EA finally let slip some details about version 3 this month. The game will remove its predecessor's rigid restrictions on travelling from place to place and instead have an open neighbourhood to explore freely; this will increase impromptu interaction with other Sims. Sims' personalities are now defined from a wide range of traits that you can mix and match to make a vast array of characters.

This is a private universe, though – no kind of online multiplayer mode is planned. Players will be able to swap their creations online, but not visit each others' neighbourhoods. The game won't be released until 2009, so you have plenty of time to say goodbye to your existing Sims.

Seth Barton

Video and games expert

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MICROSOFT Gears of War

★★★★★

COMPUTER SHOPPER
BEST BUY

£18 inc VAT

From www.game.co.uk

Gears of War has been available on Xbox 360 since the tail-end of 2006, so you'd be forgiven for wondering why it has taken so long to make its way to the PC. There are reasons to be cheerful, however, as the developers have added a few extra levels and further refined the already stunning visuals, although you'll need a powerful graphics card to enjoy them.

The plot is simple enough: the inhabitants of the planet Sera have been attacked by the vicious Locust Horde, a vast army of stupendously ugly aliens with a seriously bad attitude. Fast-forward 14 years and, with the supply of troops dwindling, mankind is forced to call on some unusual suspects. Cue Marcus Fenix, a war-hardened soldier unfairly condemned to rot in a crumbling prison. You step into the action at the point where Marcus is freed from his cell, and within seconds he finds his finger back on the trigger, with the Locust firmly in his sights.

Gears of War plays differently to your average PC shooter. This is one game where wading into battle with a trigger-happy demeanour is likely to end in a swift, inglorious death. Instead, the focus is on using the available cover intelligently, working with your team-mates and popping your head over the ramparts only when the enemy drops its guard.

Although the game was originally released on Xbox 360, the makers have done a superb job of translating the controls for the PC. You can opt to use a 360-style joypad, but mouse and keyboard work well too, and a brief tutorial quickly gets novice players up to speed.



▲ Big, ugly and brutal describes both sides in this macho shooter

Unlike many PC shooters, the action is viewed from a third-person perspective. This makes it possible to keep track of the wily Locust while remaining safely out of the line of fire. The controls make it easy to dive gracefully from burnt-out wreck to bullet-riddled wall, and the duck-and-cover tactics make for shoot-outs that are tense and thrilling in equal measure.

Our only real complaint concerns the Live for Windows software you're forced to install. When we played the single-player game without an active internet connection, Live for Windows sometimes crashed our PC, and after reading Epic Games' forums, it seems that many users have suffered similar problems. By staying online, we managed to complete the game without issues, and we had no problems with the multiplayer mode either.

The four-on-four multiplayer consists of brutal close-quarters fighting. As with the single-player game, you'll need teamwork to flank enemy positions successfully. It's an excellent addition to an already solid game that provides an interesting alternative to first-person PC shooters.

Sasha Muller

SUMMARY

- ✓ Stunning graphics
- ✓ Great cover system
- ✗ Live for Windows problems

THIRD-PERSON SHOOTER Requires Windows XP/Vista, 2.4GHz processor, 1GB RAM, 256MB graphics card, 12GB disk space
PRODUCT CODE B000E543MW
DETAILS www.gearsowar.com

Top 5 games

1. The Orange Box

£27 inc VAT ★★★★★

COMPUTER SHOPPER
BEST BUY

This bargain omnibus contains the excellent Half-Life 2 plus Episodes 1 and 2. There's also a mind-bending puzzle game, Portal, and the stylish Team Fortress 2.

SUPPLIER www.game.co.uk DETAILS www.valvesoftware.com FULL REVIEW Feb 2008



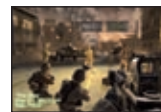
2. Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare

£30 inc VAT ★★★★★

COMPUTER SHOPPER
BEST BUY

This first-person shooter's short campaign mode is action-packed, while the multiplayer mode grabs your attention with unlockable weapons and skills.

SUPPLIER www.play.com DETAILS www.charlieoscardelta.com FULL REVIEW Feb 2008



3. Crysis

£25 inc VAT ★★★★★

Crysis gives you plenty of choice in how to approach your enemy and how to defeat them. However, its stunning graphics will leave all but the most powerful PCs struggling.

SUPPLIER www.gamemetal.co.uk DETAILS www.ea.com/crysis FULL REVIEW Feb 2008



4. BioShock

£18 inc VAT ★★★★★

COMPUTER SHOPPER
BEST BUY

BioShock successfully blends first-person shooting with RPG-style character upgrades. It's set in an undersea city that's both terrible and beautiful to behold.

SUPPLIER www.game.co.uk DETAILS www.cultofrapture.com FULL REVIEW Dec 2007



5. Lord of the Rings: Shadows of Angmar

£10 + £9 a month inc VAT ★★★★★

COMPUTER SHOPPER
BEST BUY

This online role-playing game lets you immerse yourself in Tolkien's Middle Earth. The game's detail is truly stunning, it's easy to get into and the combat is excellent.

SUPPLIER www.asda-entertainment.co.uk DETAILS www.lotro.com FULL REVIEW Sep 2007





▲ Frontline's 64-player battlefields for online games are intense and visceral

THQ Frontlines: Fuel of War

★★★★

£25 inc VAT
From www.play.com

If you're after a single-player or multiplayer first-person shooter, you're currently spoiled for choice. One new contender, Frontlines: Fuel of War, tries to cater to everyone by offering both an extensive story-driven single-player campaign and vast 64-player online battles.

Set in the near future, Frontlines charts the conflict between two new superpowers, the Western Coalition Army and the Red Star Alliance, as they battle over oil reserves.

In the single-player campaign you play as a member of an elite team of Spec Ops soldiers fighting on the conflict's frontlines. Shadowed by a journalist who narrates a set of high-quality, post-mission cut scenes, you must capture enemy-held resource fields and repel your foe's incursions into your territory.

At first, the game's visceral, intense action promises much, but it soon becomes apparent that behind the mayhem lies a fairly threadbare shooter. While levels are relatively open-ended, they're also highly repetitive, with one identikit gunfight after another. Bugs, such as vehicles getting stuck behind invisible barriers, also wear your interest thin.

The titanic multiplayer action – in which you and your comrades battle to capture strategic points on a map – is superior to the single-player game. But despite some brutal online battles involving infantry, tanks, jeeps, anti-aircraft batteries, gunships and jets, there simply isn't enough originality to challenge Unreal Tournament III (see *Shopper* 242).

The option to choose battlefield roles and upgradable specialist skills has been done better elsewhere – in Enemy Territory: Quake Wars, for example – and the lack of game modes ensures that any enjoyment is short-lived.

Frontlines promises much, but fails to deliver. It's unlikely to make much of an impact in the overcrowded first-person shooter genre.

Alex Lee

SUMMARY

- ✓ Two distinct game modes
- ✗ Not enough variety or originality
- ✗ Too many annoying bugs

FIRST PERSON SHOOTER Requires Windows XP/Vista, 2.8GHz processor, 1GB RAM, 256MB graphics card, 15GB disk space

PRODUCT CODE B000YXMKGU
DETAILS www.frontlines.com



▲ Asterix warms up for another complex keyboard combination

ATARI Asterix at the Olympic Games

★★★

£25 inc VAT
From www.play.com

With the Olympic Games just months away, it was only a matter of time before we saw an influx of games based on the event. However, Asterix at the Olympic Games isn't quite what you'd expect, as it melds the usual predictable mix of sporting mini-games with an action-adventure twist. As well as competing in Olympic events, Asterix and his rotund companion Obelix must travel between dimensions in a bid to stop Julius Caesar's son becoming ruler of all worlds.

Controlling either Asterix or Obelix (each of which has his own unique abilities), you must complete a set of simple yet mindlessly fun mini-games. If you don't own a joypad, don't even consider buying this game, as the keyboard controls are infuriatingly clunky, making even the simplest task a chore.

Most of the sporting challenges involve manic button-mashing, while the exploration sections require only a little more skill. Events include sprints, long jumps, pole-vaulting, hammer throwing and chariot racing, while the other segments involve beating up enemy soldiers and solving rudimentary puzzles. The average visuals and passable animations do little to raise the quality, while a distinct lack of variety ensures that you quickly grow bored, despite glimmers of humour that capture the zany spirit of the comics. Other problems include a suspect camera, which often points the wrong way during the adventure segments, and buggy AI that can make your opponents act erratically during sporting events.

If you have kids below the age of 10 or you're an avid Asterix fan looking for a shot of button-mashing mayhem, the game's bright visuals and flashes of humour are enough to warrant your attention. Anyone looking for a more challenging sporting experience is unlikely to find much satisfaction here.

Martin Korda

SUMMARY

- ✓ Fairly entertaining for youngsters
- ✗ Clunky keyboard controls
- ✗ Highly repetitive

ACTION-ADVENTURE Requires Windows XP/Vista, 1GHz processor, 256MB RAM (1GB for Vista), 64MB graphics card, 4GB disk space

PRODUCT CODE B00127G39M
DETAILS www.atari.com/asterix



▲ There's little to do outside the cities, but horses help you cover the ground quickly

UBISOFT Assassin's Creed: Director's Cut Edition

★★★★★

£25 inc VAT
From www.play.com

Set in the Holy Land during the Crusades, Assassin's Creed places you in control of Altair, a disgraced assassin who must slay a series of high-profile targets to regain his status. The setting makes a nice change from the usual sci-fi and fantasy offerings, but the plot is bogged down by a lot of tiresome dialogue.

Once the talking stops, the game really comes to life. Altair is among the best animated game characters we've ever seen. He's incredibly agile – scaling walls with ease, bounding from rooftop to rooftop and swan-diving into hay carts from incredible heights.

The four cities are highly detailed, and each has its own character. You must climb the highest towers to gain information important to your mission. The views are jaw-dropping, and you can explore everything you see without experiencing a single loading screen.

Before you can kill each target, you must gather intelligence on their movements and weaknesses. However, these recon missions are limited in scope and variety, despite extra types being added for the PC version. Each mission is of a strictly defined type – pickpocket, eavesdrop, kill rooftop archers – and we quickly tired of the limited selection.

Approaching your prey is more interesting and varied, whether you're scaling the walls of a castle or stealthily boarding a ship. Despite your efforts at subterfuge, though, a swordfight is often inevitable. There's a disappointing lack of imaginative methods, such as poisoning, with which to dispatch your targets.

Despite its failings, it's hard to dislike Assassin's Creed. Altair's free-running grace is addictive, making exploration of his world a joy. Just make sure you have a suitably powerful PC and a decent joypad.

Seth Barton

SUMMARY

- ✓ Incredible free-running
- ✓ Big, atmospheric cities
- ✗ Repetitive missions

ACTION-ADVENTURE Requires Windows XP/Vista, 2.6GHz dual-core processor, 2GB RAM, 256MB graphics card, 12GB disk space

PRODUCT CODE B000NG1KAA
DETAILS <http://assassinscreed.uk.ubi.com>